



Region II Referee Administrator

March 5, 2017

Members of the MI Senate Judiciary Committee

Due to previously scheduled out-of-state travel, I am unable to be present at the Senate Judiciary Hearings that have been scheduled for SB 200 and SB 201. I am therefore, as a resident of MI, submitting my written support for this legislation.

In addition to having officiated soccer in MI as well as at least 15 other states across the U.S., and having assumed leadership for the training and support of referees at a local (Lansing), State (MI) and now regional level, I feel qualified to offer a perspective of why SB 200 and 201 are important for sports officials as well as community safety. Throughout my experience as a sports official and administrator, I have witnessed, experienced, and supported individuals that have been victimized by not only players, but also spectators at recreational, travel, and competitive matches. The consequences of these events have impacted the lives of many in ways that we tend not to really consider.

At one extreme, we have lives irrevocably impacted such as the Bieniewicz family. The assault of John Bieniewicz, which resulted in his death means that two young men (both younger than 14 when their father was killed) will live the rest of their lives without their father. Moreover, his loving wife is left to deal with the questions that her children have had to deal with, as well as rebuild her own life. While the perpetrator of this event was found guilty, it does not replace life without a father/husband for an assault that occurred at a non-professional sporting event. It is acknowledged that the outcome of this assault is not the norm, the prevalence of assault toward sport officials occurs with greater frequency in community sports than most are aware, in part, since perpetrators (both spectators and player) flee the venue and identification of these individuals is challenging. Actually, it is rare that perpetrators of assaults toward sports officials receive a citation let alone are adjudicated in the judiciary.

In my capacity of an administrator for Michigan Soccer (State Youth Referee Administrator 2010 - 2016) and now as the Referee Administrator for US Youth Soccer (14-states) I have had to seek local/league sanctions for players or team personnel that assault or abuse soccer referees. On any given weekend, regardless of sport, one can hear the mockery, slurs, epithets, and threats expressed toward sports officials. Some view this as normative – after all any decision made by a sports official is “incorrect” in the eyes of at least 50% of the participants and perhaps spectators as well. However, while teams and leagues may have codes of conduct for spectators, they cannot sanction them because they are not “members” of sports organizations (e.g., AAU Basketball, USA Gymnastics, US Youth (or Michigan Youth) Soccer. Moreover, sports officials, by rules of competition, have no authority to remove a spectator that is belligerent toward, or threatening sports officials. So in short, this legislation raises the bar on civility that is expected at community sporting events should a sports official be confronted or assaulted as a consequence of their execution of responsibilities.

During my tenure at the State Youth Referee Administrator, there was no season where fewer than five cases per season of referee assault or abuse were reviewed by a disciplinary board of the state youth association. These cases ranged from destruction of referee property, verbal threats, spitting at a referee, and physical contact with the sports official. Note that my summary focuses only on youth sanctioned leagues. More disconcerting is that sports officials under the age of 18 were involved virtually all these situations – either as a witness or as the victim themselves.

This legislation is, in my experience, therefore important for a reason that many may not consider. In any given non-scholastic, community/recreation-based sport, nearly 1/3 of sport officials are under the age of 18. During my tenure as the State Youth Referee Administrator for Michigan Soccer, there were multiple reports of parents threatening and assaulting referees every season. In one situation a parent confronted three youth referees (all under the age of 18). The older of the three referees asked the parents to leave them alone, and if

he refused, the young person would call 911. The response from the parent was: *"Go ahead. And if you do I'll kick your ass before they get here and be gone. Then what are you going to do?"* Had it not been for parents from the opposing team who surrounded these three individuals (ages 13, 14, and 17), what started as a verbal assault could have resulted in physical abuse – against a minor. In another situation, a then 16-year-old female was chased to her car by angry parents – some of whom followed her as she drove away in search of safety. When she finally thought she was safe, she called her parents and cried uncontrollably. Her parents had to leave home to console her and take her home. In this situation, there were no sanctions for any spectator behavior. **NONE.**

There is also a recent example to further demonstrate the need for this legislation in MI. In the spring of 2016, a 16-year-old soccer referee was **shoved to the ground by a spectator** in Canton, MI. In short, a parent who became verbally aggressive early in the competition, escalated his expressions of anger to the point that he came onto the field during play and shoved the referee to the ground. While a police report and was filed, and subsequent sanctions were handed down by the judicial system, the sanctions received by this parent were minor in comparison to the impact that this event could have had on the victim of this situation.

I could easily add more than 20 other examples of the lack of consequences for spectators that abuse/assault sports officials in our public parks throughout the State of MI. The point is, however, that support and passing of this legislation is long overdue.

There is one additional reason that compels my enthusiastic support for SB 200 and 201. Simply stated, sports officials in non-scholastic sports involve youth (as young as 12 or 13) and adults who try to give back to sports that they love. While the prevalence of assault/abuse is considered infrequent, there are no state statutes that protect sports officials who provide a valuable service to promote youth engagement and participation in non-scholastic sports. The aforementioned examples illustrate a reason for why this abuse is perceived to be acceptable – we have no policy or support to seek justice for those that victimize sports officials. This legislation would send a loud message to citizens of MI – that the assault and abuse of sports officials is simply not tolerated. Moreover, any person who engages in such actions, based on the consequences of their perpetuated actions, could face serious consequences for their deplorable actions.

As a resident of MI, a parent of sports official that was verbally assaulted and threatened, a soccer referee of over 20-years, and an administrator for soccer in Michigan and the Midwest, I urge you to support this legislation to protect our sports officials who, through their devotion, offer a valuable community service.

Respectfully

Francisco A. Villarruel
US Youth Soccer Region II Referee Administrator
1876 Heatherton Dr
Holt, MI 48842
517-290-7681